

Cuba libre!

By: *Vaclav Havel, former President of Czech republic*
Árpád Göncz, former President of Hungary
Lech Wałęsa, former President of Poland
As published in the Washington Post
18 September 2003

Exactly half a year ago today Fidel Castro's regime imprisoned 75 representatives of the Cuban opposition. More than forty coordinators of the Varela project and over twenty journalists together with other representatives of various pro-democracy movements landed in jail. All of them were sentenced in mock trials to prison terms ranging from 6 to 28 years – merely for daring to express an opinion other than the official one.

Yet the voice of freethinking Cubans is growing louder, and that is precisely what Fidel Castro and his government deservedly must be worried about. Despite the omnipresent secret police and government propaganda thousands of Cubans have already demonstrated their courage by signing project Varela, which draws on the current Cuban constitution and calls for holding a referendum on the freedom of speech and assembly, the release of political prisoners, the freedom of enterprise, and free elections. The response of the regime to project Varela as well as other initiatives, however, is disregard in the better case and persecution in the worse case.

The latest wave of confrontations accompanied by anti-European diatribes by the Cuban political leadership can be regarded as nothing but an expression of weakness and desperation. The regime is running short of breath – just like the party rulers in the Iron Curtain countries did at the end of the 1980's. Internal opposition is growing in strength – even the police raids in March failed to bring it to its knees. The times are changing, the revolution is aging together with its leaders, the regime is nervous. Fidel Castro knows only too well that there will come a day when the revolution will perish together with him.

Nobody knows exactly what will happen then. However, the clearer it will be in Brussels, Washington, Mexico, among the exiles as well as Cuban residents themselves, that freedom, democracy, and prosperity in Cuba depend on the support for Cuban dissidents, the better the chances for a future peaceful transition of the Cuban society to democracy.

Today it is the responsibility of the democratic world to support representatives of the Cuban opposition irrespective of how long the Cuban Stalinists still manage to cling to power. The Cuban opposition must experience the same international support as the representatives of political dissent did in the up to recently divided Europe. Condemning responses combined with specific diplomatic steps coming from Europe, Latin America, and the United States would thus be suitable means of exerting pressure on the repressive regime in Cuba.

It cannot be claimed that the American embargo of Cuba has brought about the results desired. Neither can this be said about the European policy, which has been so far considerably more forthcoming towards the Cuban regime. It is time to put aside transatlantic disputes about the embargo of Cuba and to concentrate on direct support for Cuban dissidents, prisoners of conscience, and their families. Europe ought to make it unambiguously clear that Fidel Castro is a dictator, and that for democratic countries a dictatorship cannot become a partner until it commences a process of political liberalization.

At the same time European countries should establish a "Cuban Democracy Fund" to support the emergence of a civil society in Cuba. Such a fund would be ready for instant use in the case of political changes on the island.

The historically recent European experience with peaceful transitions from dictatorship to democracy, be it earlier in Spain or later in the countries of central Europe, has been an inspiration for the Cuban opposition. It is thus Europe in particular who should not hesitate now, in view of its own experience. It is obliged to do so by its own history.